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THE WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
25 April 1980

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JF Rescue

C-130, Copter Collide, Killing Eight Americans

Carter Accepts 'Full Responsibility' For Rescue Attempt

By Phil Gailey
Washington Star Staff Writer

President Carter, in a somber television address to the nation, said today equipment failure forced him to abort a "carefully planned" commando-style operation to rescue the American hostages in Iran.

The president accepted full responsibility for the operation and expressed his personal sorrow for the loss of eight American servicemen who died in the collision of a

U.S. military plane and helicopter on a remote desert transport strip in Iran.

Speaking from the Oval Office, Carter said he will provide the people with more information on the attempted rescue when it is "appropriate."

The president revealed that the planning for the rescue operation began shortly after Iranian militants seized the American hostages in the U.S. Embassy compound in Tehran last Nov. 4. He said that he knew the operation would be "difficult and dangerous," but once it was under way he said it had an "excellent" chance of success.

The rescue team was made up of volunteers and involved intensive training and repeated rehearsals, the president said. Carter said he personally met with the leaders of the team before they left on their mission, which ended in failure in a remote area of the Iranian desert. Carter said he canceled the operation because of helicopter equipment failure.

Carter said that the mission was not undertaken with "hostility" toward Iran. He said he made the decision to send in the rescue team after it became apparent that the Iranian authorities were not interested in a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Carter said it was both "necessity and duty" that led him to order the rescue operation.

Carter said the United States will continue to try to resolve the crisis through "peaceful and diplomatic means." After his address to the nation from the oval office, Carter held a breakfast meeting with his national security advisers, including Vice President Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. David Jones, CIA Director Stansfield Turner and White House Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan.

The raid was halted suddenly and eight servicemen were killed in the failed mission when two U.S. military aircraft collided in the Iranian desert, the White House announced early today.

All Americans involved in the rescue attempt got out of Iran, White House spokesman Jody Powell said in reading a statement to reporters. The statement said some servicemen were injured but were expected to recover.

State Department officer Mark Johnson said, "We have no evidence of any reaction against the hostages." The militants occupying the U.S. Embassy have repeatedly threatened to kill the 50 American hostages if "even the smallest" military action were taken.

After the regular Friday morning mass prayers thousands of Moslem converged on the embassy chanting in celebration over the aborted U.S. rescue mission.

Carter canceled the mission because of "equipment failure," Powell said, without giving details of the failure or the scope of the mission. He said the aircraft collided in a remote desert area as they were withdrawing.

The White House said there was no military clash with Iranian forces and there were no Iranians injured in the effort.

There was no immediate word on the exact timing or location of the rescue bid.

However, Israeli radio reported today that the United States used an Egyptian air base as a staging area for the rescue attempt and used at least three troop-carrying C-130 Hercules transports in the mission.

The report said the planes took off about midnight (5 p.m. EST) from Cairo West, an Egyptian air base where up to 125 American military personnel have been based to train Egyptian airmen.

The radio report, based on the monitoring of air traffic, said the planes stopped in the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain on their way to Iran. Further details were immediately available.

Although Egyptian President Anwar Sadat has said Egypt would be willing to provide air base facilities to the United States if Washington needed them, an Egyptian Cabinet spokesman in Cairo denied today that Egypt was involved in any way in the attempt.

"We had absolutely nothing to do with this operation," the spokesman said. "The Israeli radio report of Egyptian involvement is false."

"This mission was not motivated by hostility toward Iran or the Iranian people and there were no Iranian casualties," Powell said.

The president was to give a nationally televised speech from the Oval Office early today.

Powell said Carter ordered the mission aborted and "accepts full responsibility for the decision to attempt the rescue."

On Jan. 8 the president told members of Congress that because of the logistics in Tehran "a strike force or military action that might be oriented toward the release of the hostages would almost certainly end in failure and almost certainly end in the death of the hostages."

A commando-type raid had been an option since the embassy was seized.

Sen. Charles Percy, R-Ill., said he was told by the State Department that there had been a collision between a helicopter and a C-130 transport plane shortly after the mission was aborted.

Percy said Carter's decision to call off the operation came after the White House received reports of an engine failure on one of the planes involved. However, CBS reported that the mission actually was aborted because a helicopter became stuck in mud.

Percy said the plan was to set up a staging base in the desert some distance from Tehran for a quick commando raid to free the hostages, now in their 174th day of captivity.

State and Defense department officials were called to midnight meetings to discuss the situation. A U.S. naval task force of 27 ships — including two aircraft carriers with 150 planes and 1,800 Marines — is in the Indian Ocean within striking distance of Iran.

Key congressional leaders and the families of the hostages also were informed of the aborted rescue mission in the early-morning hours.

Powell said Carter ordered preparations for the rescue attempt "for humanitarian reasons, to protect the national interests of this country and to alleviate international tensions."

The press secretary said, "The nation is deeply grateful to the brave men who were preparing to rescue the hostages."

The White House statement said, "The United States continues to hold the government of Iran responsible for the safety of the American hostages. The United States remains determined to obtain their safe release at the earliest possible time."

It was not immediately clear from the White House statement what time the rescue attempt was made or how long an interval there was between the failed attempt and the White House announcement of the operation.

Neither were any immediate details as to the scope of the attempt or how many U.S. servicemen were involved. No Pentagon spokesmen were available to comment, and a CIA spokesman refused to comment.

The rescue effort called first for creating a staging base in a desert area of Iran, congressional sources said today.

Percy said he had been informed by the State Department the United States had dispatched C-130 Hercules transport planes to Iran with helicopters aboard.

The administration appeared to be successful in flying the C-130s into Iran secretly, presumably from bases in the area. Both neighboring Turkey and Pakistan have the secure military fields where the mission could have been launched.

Defense Secretary Harold Brown was summoned by the White House about 4:15 p.m., sources said.

He was observed hurriedly leaving his office at 4:45 p.m. and remained at the White House until after midnight when the operation was ended.

He immediately returned to the Pentagon where he summoned a close circle of aides: Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Thomas Ross, his press spokesman; Peter Hamilton, a special assistant; and several others.

This meeting broke up at about 2:30 a.m.

This article is based in part on wire service reports.